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Teachers in a New Political Landscape

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The political environment in the United States is undergoing rapid transformation (Mason, 2018; Price, 2008). While many scholars have focused on national dynamics (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2017; Fukayama, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Price, 2018; Taylor, 2017), there have also been significant shifts at the state level. In particular, Texas has experienced both electoral and policy changes since the 2018 election cycle. A major catalyst for these statewide shifts is the positionality of teachers within the political landscape.

Advocacy and electoral politics have changed the role of teachers in Texas. The growing political capital of teachers might not seem surprising, given that education has always been a central political talking point for state legislators in the Lone Star State. Commonly referenced as a priority during speeches, town halls, and in newsletters, pointing to education is a standard within Texas political discourse, especially to appease voters (Jenkins, 2010). However, even when legislators have the best of intentions, education policy has traditionally struggled to be one of the landmark pieces of legislation during any legislative session. Not only have education policies struggled to cross the finish line, but centering teachers within the conversation has also been lacking. As teachers increased their presence in the electorate, the focus of the 86th legislative session shifted these dynamics. Reflecting on the background of education policy, recent teacher advocacy, and the outcomes of school finance policy within the 86th legislative session is critical to understanding teacher positionality and teacher agency within the changing political landscape in Texas.

The 86th Texas Legislative Session

The 86th Texas legislative session was a landmark session for education. With leaders of both parties united in the quest for improved school finance early on (Swaby, 2019; Wilson & Goudeau, 2019), the 86th legislature was characterized by a different, renewed energy towards education. This shift marked a departure from the previous session, which was dominated by social issues including legislation such as the infamously anti-LGBTQ “bathroom bill” (Senate Bill 6, 2017) and the anti-immigrant sanctuary cities bill (Senate Bill 4, 2017).

So, why the shift? Elections. Electoral consequences matter to legislators and the agenda shift of the 86th Texas legislative session is a clear example of that reality. The 2018 election cycle in Texas surprised many. The electorate increased 18 percentage points compared to the previous mid-term statewide election (Wang, 2018). Democrats gained twelve seats in the Texas House of Representatives, bringing the partisan balance to 83 Republicans to 67 Democrats, and two seats in the Texas Senate, resulting in 19 Republicans to 12 Democrats. The narrowing of the partisan divide increased the competitiveness between the Democratic and Republican parties, which affected legislator behavior.

Increased party competition compels legislators in the majority party to act more moderately in order to appeal to a larger spectrum of voters, especially legislators in contested districts (Jenkins,

2010; Wright, Osborn, & Winburn, 2004). Additionally, as the majority party loses members, its internal ideological factions are less likely to defect from the party on key votes (Kirkland & Slapin, 2017). This effect is quite evident when comparing the voting behavior of the ultra-conservative Texas House Freedom Caucus on the major school finance bills of the 85th legislative session (House Bill 21, 2017) and the 86th session (HB 3, 2019). On HB 21 (2017), 14 members of the Freedom Caucus broke ranks with the Republican Party to vote against the measure, while only one Freedom Caucus member voted against HB 3 (2019) during the following session. Furthermore, multiple members of the Republican Party departed from the Freedom Caucus altogether in 2019. Ultimately, the 86th legislature saw greater levels of agreement on a school funding package, particularly in the House of Representatives, which led to the passage of an \$11.6 billion school finance bill in a state that labored for over a decade to pass meaningful legislation in this area.

The intentional organizing and marketing of educators as an electoral bloc was a key component to the 2018 electoral change and resulting shift in policy agenda (Miller, 2019; Platoff, 2018). Mailed pamphlets and postcards, social media strategies, and grassroots organizing centered on the theme, “I am an educator and I vote.” Organizations like “Texas Educators Vote” and coalitions emerged to engage voters within the education profession about educator issues.

Two dominant catalysts spurred the educator movement in Texas in advance of the 86th legislative session. First, coalition-building occurred simultaneously during teacher activism across the country, which created a feeling of solidarity and empowerment amongst educators (Claster, 2018; Miller, 2019; Will, 2019). Second, and closer to home, was the anti-teacher and anti-public education legislation that was filed during the 85th Texas legislative session. For example, the “union dues bill” (SB 13) aimed to prohibit automatic payroll deductions for teachers’ union and other public employees’ dues payments. Interpreted as a deliberate tactic to limit educator political participation and voice (Canaves, 2017), the bill mobilized educators across the state to organize beyond party lines against this perceived attack. The combination of national momentum and harmful state policies motivated the educator-centric campaign, which led to an increased bipartisan focus on education and educators. The outcome of these dynamics was the space, will, and political pressure to accomplish school finance reform during the 86th legislative session in preparation for the 2020 election/re-election cycle.

From School Finance to Teacher Pay

While both teacher pay and school finance are education topics, they aren’t necessarily a connected conversation. Texas has historically underfunded education, compared to other states (DeMatthews & Knight, 2018; Samuels, 2018). The consequence of long-term underfunding is a battle for resources, which can push increasing teacher pay to the bottom of the priorities list in favor of other necessities like student supports. However, in January of 2019, as the legislative session was taking off, Lieutenant (Lt.) Governor Dan Patrick announced an across-the-board pay raise for teachers (Senate Bill 3, 2019) as one of his top legislative priorities (Office of the Lieutenant Governor, 2019). His announcement followed weeks of the Speaker of the House emphasizing that the Texas House of Representatives would prioritize an overhaul of the school finance formula. Teacher pay and school finance were now bonded by support from the state’s top political leadership.

The statement by the Lt. Governor shocked political insiders who had witnessed his long history of using and advancing anti-public education and anti-teacher rhetoric and policies in pursuit of privatization efforts (Miller, 2019). Political commentators point to the change in the Lt. Governor’s

agenda as a result of the 2018 elections (Miller, 2019). While both were Republican incumbents running for statewide office, Dan Patrick won his re-election even more narrowly than Governor Abbott, with 51.3% of the vote compared to Abbott's 55.8%. As expected by the education community, Patrick's most vocal opponents – educators – caused this tight win (Platoff, 2018; Ratcliff, 2018). To respond to the opposition he experienced on the campaign trail, the Lt. Governor centered teacher pay and pushed it into the school finance conversation.

The convergence of school finance and teacher pay led to a nearly non-negotiable understanding that pay raises would be a part of whatever school finance bill passed the legislature. The Lt. Governor's push for a \$5,000 across-the-board pay raise for educators was financially incompatible with other priorities, such as billions in tax relief. Thus, the legislature ultimately approved a less expensive, locally-defined teacher pay raise mandate within HB 3.

Interrelated Factors Impacting Teacher Positionality

It may seem counter intuitive, but among the countless hours of political discourse around education, the inclusion of educators has been inconsistent. Although the sporadic “let teachers teach” reference emerges from time to time, prioritizing educators' voices, needs, and knowledge isn't always common or a part of regular policy discussions in comparison to other professions. The positionality of educators within the current political system is limited by a variety of complex and inter-related factors, including institutional regulations, class, and gender, which act to exclude teacher pay from school finance conversations.

A contributing factor to the position of educators within the political landscape is the impact of identity in the formation of systems. With regard to class identity, there are a variety of barriers that make it difficult for low-income, working-class, and middle-class individuals to run for the Texas Legislature. These include the high costs of campaigns, the low pay of legislators, the challenges to earning an income while in session, and laws banning legislators' employment at a state agency or governmental entity (such as being a professor at a public university). For example, currently Texas legislators earn \$7,200 a year (not including per diem for expenses while in Austin, Texas, for government-related business). Additionally, in Texas and many other states (Will, 2018), legislators are not permitted to work for governmental entities, including local public schools, state universities, and community colleges. These institutional roadblocks limit the pathway for educators to be elected to the Texas Legislature.

The lack of ease with which an educator can enter office limits the number of Texas legislators who have an occupational background in education. In fact, across the nation, the percentage of state legislators who have direct expertise in education is low compared to those with occupations in business and law (National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 2015b). Compared to a nationwide average of 6%, Texas is among several states with the lowest percentages of educator-legislators - at 3% (NCSL, 2015a). When educators do make it to office, they likely do not benefit from the same electoral benefits as lawyer-legislators and legislators who are businesspersons. These individuals enjoy significantly higher campaign contributions from political action committees (PACs) who can help to ensure the future career prospects of the legislator, as well as their re-election (Matter & Stutzer, 2015; Witko & Friedman, 2008). The difficulty of obtaining and maintaining office accounts for the lack of educator presence on the legislative floor and the limited visibility and inclusion of teacher voices in the halls of power.

Gender is also a key factor in identity that affects the positionality of educators within the political landscape of the Texas legislature. The female-dominated profession of teaching is a public service-oriented profession that is subject to the will of the male-dominated political institution. In 2019, the Texas legislature was only 23% female and the majority of those were Democrats (Ura & Cameron, 2019). In contrast, the Texas public education teaching force was 76% female in the 2017-2018 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Having a majority-male legislature puts the legitimacy of women and their work at risk because of the implicit biases and consequences of embedded sexism in our society (Galea & Gaweda, 2018).

The consequences of the educator-legislator gender imbalance are evident in Texas's labor policy outcomes. For example, the United States Congress has passed legislation attempting to address the gender pay gap. Texas, however, has failed to pass similar state-level legislation. For educators, the impact of gender on pay is worsened by the historical treatment of subordinated women's work or occupations of care as not being worthy of full compensation (Oram, 2007). Recognizing the gender, class, and occupational aspects of the teaching profession, the lack of attention to gender pay discrepancy in the state as a whole, and the imbalance of female and educator legislators serving within the Texas Legislature reveals multiple layers of invisibility and complexity to the teacher pay issue.

What This Means Moving Forward

Now, more than ever, educators are in a strategically unique position within the framework of Texas politics. Recognized as a political voting bloc as well as a growing occupational identity within state legislative bodies, a larger educator presence provides the opportunity for substantive and necessary policy changes (Will & Schwartz, 2018). In order to capitalize on the moment, reflection, research, and intentional strategic plans are necessary for future agenda building. Retired teachers present a parallel yet different identity group to draw examples and knowledge from due to their similar position within the Texas political landscape. For example, after years of organizing, retired teachers are recognized as a critical bloc to consider by lawmakers when establishing a legislative agenda. Their advocacy has been so effective that retired teacher issues are addressed every session, though not always exactly in the ways that they want. Furthermore, based on the authors' experience, every legislator, regardless of political party, avoids having a vote against the retired teachers in their community. The positionality of retired teachers developed particularly over the last decade as they began to market themselves as a loud advocacy organization and strong voting bloc. By strategically organizing, marketing, and participating in elections, retired teachers moved themselves up on the legislative political agenda.

The position of retired teachers also allows for their issues to be used as pawns in the political chess game. During the 85th legislative session, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick was determined to pass facility funding for charter schools. However, the issue was having difficulty moving forward, particularly through the Texas House of Representatives, because of a coalition of rural Republicans and pro-public education Democrats. In order to advance the issue, the Lt. Governor attached charter school facility funding to a piece of legislation that was aimed to save the retired teacher's pension fund (HB 21). Even though legislators debated about how these two issues shouldn't have been tied together, the measure passed because they were concerned about voting against retired teachers. Recognizing the ways power dynamics work within the legislature is critical for educators as their role in the political landscape changes.

In order to embrace their new position for positive and necessary change, educators need to unite and develop action plans collectively. Take the example of standardized testing – educators frequently raise concerns of the current high-stakes testing assessment system in Texas. The validity and urgency of the concern quickly dissipates because legislators respond by asking, “And what should we replace it with?” While there are many alternatives to the testing regime that currently exists in Texas, such as portfolio and performance-based assessments, there is not a unified voice from the educator community on next steps or an alternative assessment. Without a plan to accompany the critique of the assessment system, legislation to ameliorate the situation has less chance to progress.

Understanding the internal dynamics of legislative session is critical to being successful in accomplishing a political goal. The Texas Legislature meets every two years for 140 days to address the issues impacting nearly 30 million Texans. On average over 10,000 pieces of legislation are filed each legislative session. The short time period of the legislative session, as well as the multitude of topics that must be covered, necessitates that any successful legislation has broad consensus amongst legislators in both chambers. Policy ideas that do not have consensus struggle to complete the legislative process within the time permitted during session. Thus, as educators create future legislative agendas, developing a healthy coalition of education groups with a collective plan together is key to success.

Conclusion

Educators have been successful in intentionally and strategically entering the Texas political landscape as an influential voting bloc. With the changes in demographics and elections in Texas, educators’ voice will continue to grow. Reflecting on the teacher pay policy process of the 86th Texas legislative session illuminates the systematic power dynamics within the Texas Legislature, the inner workings of the political arena, and the potential for future public policy change.

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